

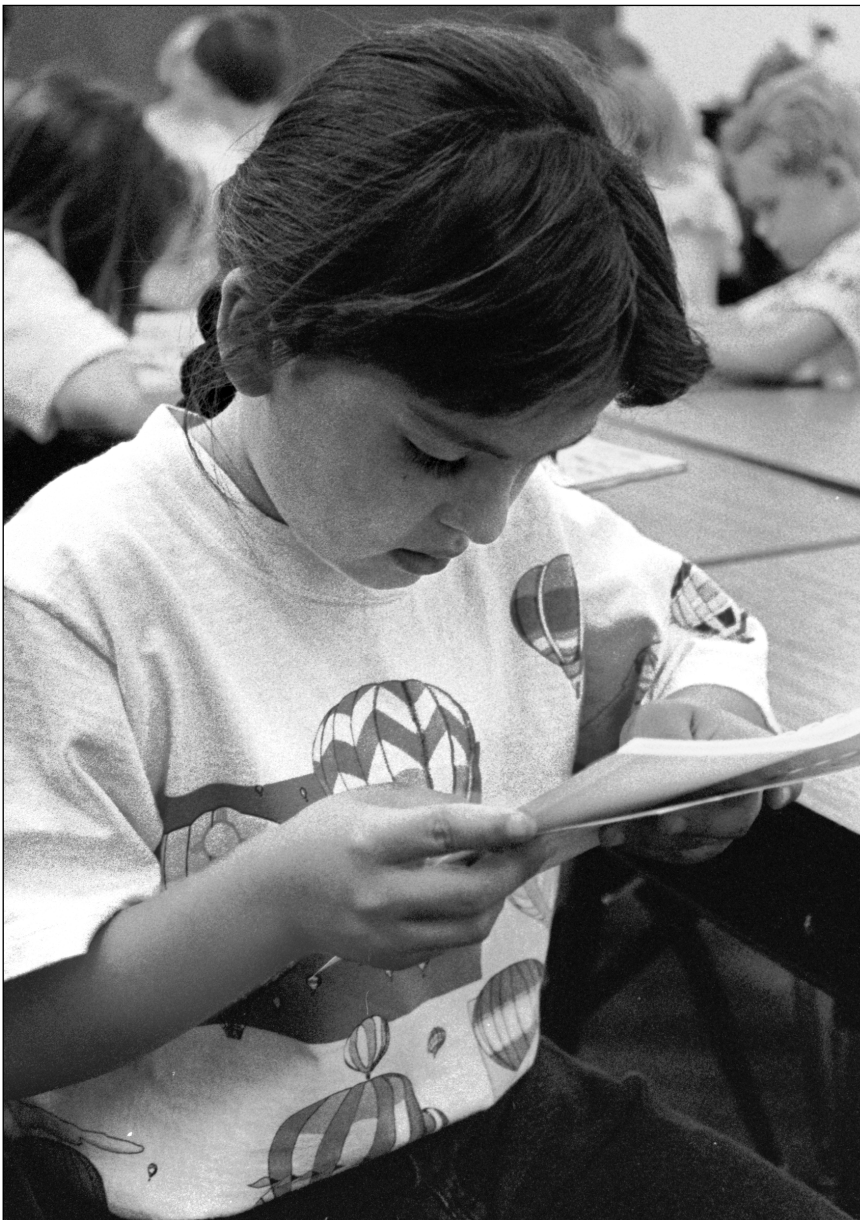
# “I want her to know me”: The Ways Adults Position Young Children

Sue Novinger

*The ways in which adults position children through their discourse shape and constrain what children learn about writing and themselves as writers.*

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The Ways Adults Position Children



The anticipation was palpable as college students in my literacy class received their first letters from their new first-grade pen pals. Sean opened his letter from Marcy and read:

*January 26, 2000*

*Dear Sean,*

*I have a cinputr it is windos 98 and these are the games at I have—soft kareoke. it has a mikrfon. and the magke slo bus, a day at the beach. Marcy*

[I have a computer. It is Windows 98 and these are the games that I have—Soft Kareoke. It has a microphone. And the Magic School Bus, a Day at the Beach.]

And here is how Sean responded:

*2-3-00*

*Dear Marcy,*

*Thank you for writing to me. I'm very excited to be your pen pal. We (my wife, two sons, and I) have a computer, too! My oldest son's (Jack) favorite games on it are Donkey on a Stick and Arcade Games.*

*My favorite colors are blue (deep, clear, sapphire, sky blue) and green (dark, lush, thick lawn green).*

*Your pen pal,  
Sean*

In his response, Sean took up Marcy's topic of computers and computer games and shared information

about his own computer and about his family. His response demonstrated that he took Marcy's interests seriously, and that he was willing to let her set, or at least share, the agendas for their letters. Through the way he addressed Marcy, Sean seemed to position himself and Marcy as conversational partners, as equals in the letter exchange. (Pseudonyms are used for all project participants.)

As I read and reread the collected correspondence of the adult-child pen pals, I realized that not all college students addressed their pen pals in this way. Instead, at least half of the adults ignored children's topic initiations and wrestled control of the exchanges away from children through lengthy lists of questions. The children in these pairs typically wrote letters that were little more than simple responses to the adult's questions. The modes of address (Ellsworth, 1997) used by the adults made a world of difference in how they and the children were positioned in relation to each other in their ongoing exchanges. In this article, I closely examine the ways these teachers-to-be sought to position themselves and children within power-knowledge relationships in the context of the pen pal letters, and the difference such positionings made for the child writers—and might make for the teachers my students will become. Moreover, I want to think about the parallels between the ways preservice teachers took up particular modes of address and the ways that those of us who are practicing teachers address students.

## OUR PEN PAL PROJECT

The letters analyzed here were written over the course of the 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 academic years as part of a pen pal project between first-grade children and preservice teachers enrolled in

an introductory literacy methods course that I teach. Like many others who have used such projects (Ceprano & Garan, 1998; Crowhurst,

about the children's writing. Typically the college students outnumbered the first-graders, so each semester several children wrote to

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1992), the two first-grade teachers and I saw the pen pal exchange as an integral part of the literacy curriculum in each of our classrooms. We believed the project provided children with opportunities to engage in writing for authentic, personally meaningful purposes. At the same time, the project gave preservice teachers opportunities to construct understandings about children's emergent literacy, develop a relationship with a young child, and consider implications for their work as literacy teachers.

Letters were exchanged weekly, except in the case of school and college vacations. The first-grade children and teachers regularly gathered to read and discuss the letters, and letter writing was included as part of the language arts block each week. As the children became more fluent readers, many of them chose to read the letters on their own, rather than sharing their letters in the group. Typically, although not always, children all wrote at the same time each week. When children were finished, a teacher or teaching assistant listened to the child read the letter and then scripted words written in invented spellings that the teachers thought the college students might have difficulty decoding. Such scripting was a regular practice across a range of literacy events in each of the participating classrooms.

In the college classroom, my students and I spent time each week reading and responding to children's letters, as well as talking

two college pen pals.

Over the course of the study, 120 of the college students enrolled in five sections of my introductory literacy course participated in the project. Eighty-eight percent of the students were women while 12% were men. Seven percent of the students were African American, 2% were Hispanic, and 91% were European American. A total of 102 children enrolled in a suburban public school in western New York participated in the project. Although parallel racial and ethnic information is not provided here for the children, demographic information for the school district reveals a profile similar to the college classes: 3.5% African American, 1.5% American Indian/Alaskan/Asian/Pacific Islander, 92.1% European American, and 2.8% Hispanic. Twenty-four percent of the students in the district receive free or reduced lunch.

I made photocopies of all sets of correspondence between each child-adult pair. In addition, I videotaped semi-structured individual interviews with all but two of the children during the last month of the school year. In these interviews, children talked about what they liked and did not like about being and having a pen pal, and how they decided what to write in their letters.

## POSITIONING WITHIN POWER-KNOWLEDGE RELATIONSHIPS

I turned to the work of discourse and positioning theorists to help

me make sense of the pen pal letters. What we know comes from within a particular discourse (Davies, 2000). What counts as valid knowledge, as valid ways of coming to know, and as valid ways of being in the world is shaped by the discourses in which we are immersed (Gee, 1992; Hicks, 1996). As such, discourses are never neutral, but shape and constrain what we might know and how we might know it. We learn to take up these particular ways of seeing and knowing the world through socialization within discourse communities (Davies, 2000). Young children, for example, learn what it means to be a writer, in part, through immersion in the literacy discourses of their classrooms.

Discourses embody relations of power (Foucault, 1977), and so we also learn ways of *being* made possible by the overlapping discourses in which we are immersed. Shaping and constraining the ways we might interact with others, discourses make available the possible positionings which we might, or might not, take up (Berghoff, 1997; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). To be positioned or to take up a position, then, is to be located, and to locate ourselves in relations of power and knowledge within a particular discourse. For example, through their immersion in a range of discourse communities, including college classrooms and the school settings where they engage in field experiences, preservice teachers are socialized in terms of the possible positions they might take up in relationship to mentor teachers, professors, and children. Ellsworth's (1997) work on *mode of address*, drawn from the field of film studies, proved to be critical in helping me think about how such positioning processes were played out among the pen pals. Modes of

address include the content of a message and how that content is conveyed and shaped by who we think we are and by who we think those we are addressing are. Ellsworth tells us that "each time we address someone, we take up a position within knowledge, power and desire in relation to them and assign them to a position in relation to ourselves and to a context" (p. 54).

**Discourses are never neutral, but shape and constrain what we might know and how we might know it.**

Situated within discourses, the modes of address teachers and preservice teachers use "are aimed precisely at shaping, anticipating, meeting, or changing who a student thinks she is" (p. 7). Of course, who we think we and others are, as well as the modes of address we employ in the pursuit of our purposes, are grounded in the discourses in which we are immersed.

Grounded in this theoretical perspective, I examined each adult-child set of correspondence and noted themes and patterns, which I then compared across all sets of correspondence. As a result of this initial analysis, I coded each set of letters in terms of topics discussed; topic initiations, responses, and elaborations; and the language functions (Halliday, 1969) used by each child and adult in her or his letters. Next, I revisited the letters, along with the children's interviews, in order to examine the different modes of address that were enacted among each pair. I contemplated what those modes of address seemed to reveal about who my students thought the children were, who they seemed

to think they were themselves, and how relations of power might have been constructed through the modes of address enacted in the letters.

Two distinct sets of discursive practices emerged through this reexamination. The first of these discourses I call the *discourse of adult authority*, and the second I call the *discourse of shared authority*. In the following two sections, I use examples of correspondence written from within each discourse to examine how participants were positioned throughout the exchanges.

### "What is your favorite color?": The Discourse of Adult Authority

Approximately half of the correspondence from preservice teachers fell within the discourse of adult authority. Writing from within this discourse, adults initiated most topics, asked many questions, and responded briefly, if at all, to children's topic initiations and questions. The exchange between Jane and first-grader Anna is typical of this discourse. Here is their first set of letters:

*January 26, 2000*

*Dear Jane, Wat is or favrit color? hiw old ar you? I have blond har a I have blue eyes. Wat is or farrit thing to toch? Love, Anna*

[Dear Jane, What is your favorite color? How old are you? I have blond hair and I have blue eyes. What is your favorite thing to touch? Love, Anna]

*Feb. 2, 2000*

*Dear Anna,*  
*I was very happy to get your letter. My favorite color is green. What is yours? I am twenty years old. How old are you? I have brown hair and blue eyes, too. Do you have any pets? I have two dogs and I love them very much. One of them is big and the*

*other one is little. Do you like school? What do you like to do? Your friend, Jane*

Anna, who had a pen pal the semester before, initiated the exchange by employing a mode of address used by many of the children in their initial letters to their new pen pals. Anna's purpose was to introduce herself and to ask questions in order to learn something about Jane. She initiated four topics: favorite color, age, appearance, and favorite thing to touch. I had just read a book with the children about new friends getting to know each other by sharing their favorite things, and this likely influenced Anna's questions about Jane's favorite color and favorite thing to touch. Although this was only her first letter to Jane, it was to be the *last* time Anna initiated a topic for discussion.

For her part, Jane briefly answered most of Anna's questions, and repeated Anna's questions about favorite color and age. Jane did not elaborate on Anna's questions. Interestingly, she did not respond to Anna's question about her favorite thing to touch. Perhaps this seemed, to Jane, to be outside the range of questioning norms. Jane initiated the topic of pets and asked two new questions.

In all, Jane asked five questions in her first letter to Anna, a pattern that would continue throughout their correspondence. The effect of Jane's mode of address can be seen in Anna's second letter:

*2/7/00*

*Dear Jane, My favorite color is green too. I am six years old. Next math [month] I will be seven. I have pets yes. your friend, Anna*

Anna's first letter was full of questions for Jane, but in this letter she simply responded to each of Jane's questions. And while she elaborated on Jane's question about her age by

sharing that she would soon be seven, she answered each of the other questions without elaboration. For example, she told Jane that she

**The adults wrote only brief responses to any initiations made by the children, and frequently ignored those initiations altogether.**

has pets, but did not tell her anything about them. Within this pair's first three letters, particular discursive practices were emerging—Jane addressed Anna with a series of closed questions, while Anna returned the address by simply answering those questions.

Jane and Anna seemed to take these modes of address as shared discursive practices over the next month. Jane continued to control the exchange through unrelenting questions about Anna's birthday and Pokémon.

*2-10-00*

*Dear Anna,  
Hello! How are you? What day next month is your birthday? My birthday is June 17th. Are you having a birthday party? I love birthday parties.  
What kind of presents do you want for your birthday? What kind of toys do you like? What is the name of your pet?  
Your friend, Jane*

*2-15-00*

*Dear Jane, I am good. My birthday is on March 1. I want [want] pokémon cards. Love,  
Anna*

*2-17-2000*

*Dear Anna,  
Guess what? My sister's birthday is March 1st too! She will be 19 years*

*old. Do you watch the Pokémon cartoon? Who is your favorite character? How many cards do you have? How was your February break? I hope you had fun!  
Your friend,  
Jane*

*Feb. 28, 2000*

*Dear Jane,  
That is so cool! I don't rememb [remember] how many pokémon cards I have. yes I watch the pokémon cartoon. Do you like it cas [cause] I do. I will be seeing you son [soon]. Your friend, Anna*

*March 2, 2000*

*Dear Anna,  
How was your birthday? Did you have a party and a birthday cake? Did you get more Pokémon cards? I have only watched the Pokémon cartoon one time. I liked it! I loved the picture you drew. I can't wait until we get to meet each other. I'll talk to you soon!  
Your friend, Jane*

*March 6, 2000*

*Dear Jane,  
My birthday was grat [great] and I like evre [every] thing that I got. It was fun! yes I had a party and I had a birthday cake. I got more Pokémon cards, Your friend, Anna*

The modes of address employed by Jane are representative of other letters written from within the discourse of adult authority. These preservice teachers primarily addressed children through a series of questions, most of which were closed (e.g., When is your birthday? What is your favorite color?). The adults wrote only brief responses to any initiations made by the children, and frequently ignored those initiations altogether. Students shared a minimal amount of personal information and feelings, and instead chose topics related to upcoming holidays, birthdays, the weather, and their favorite things (e.g., color,

food, etc.). It seemed to me that such topic choices demonstrated a limited understanding of young children as individuals with a wide range of interests and experiences. Their questions seemed forced and artificial, focused on simply getting children to generate text.

In the same way, the modes of address in Anna's letters are representative of those used by the children whose adult pen pals wrote from within the discourse of adult authority. These children's letters typically consisted of short, factual replies to the adult's questions. While a few of these children often added a question of their own or briefly initiated a new topic, the overwhelming majority did not. Over the course of the semester, these children tended to write shorter letters than they had written at the beginning of the exchange, and their letters were generally shorter than the letters written by children whose adult pen pals took up a different mode of address. Interestingly, the length of children's letters seemed to have more to do with the modes of address used by their adult pen pals than by the child's general writing ability.

As I read and reread these sets of correspondence, I was struck by how much these letters reminded me of typical classroom discourses wherein teachers are positioned as those who get to ask the questions, while children are positioned to provide answers, which will then be judged by their teachers (Hall, Crawford, & Robinson, 1997).

### "My family is very happy with me": The Discourse of Shared Authority

Approximately half of the preservice teachers wrote within the discourse of shared authority. They shared topic initiations with children, elaborated the children's topic initiations, and asked a limited number

of questions. The correspondence between Sean and Marcy is representative of the practices that emerged within this discourse. Here, we revisit their first exchange.

*January 26, 2000*

*Dear Sean,*

*I have a cinputr it is windos 98 and these are the games at I have—soft kareoke. it has a mikrfon. and the magke slo bus, a day at the beach. Marcy*

[I have a computer. It is Windows 98 and these are the games that I have—Soft Kareoke. It has a microphone. And the Magic School Bus, a Day at the Beach.]

*2-3-00*

*Dear Marcy,*

*Thank you for writing to me. I'm very excited to be your pen pal. We (my wife, two sons, and I) have a computer, too! My oldest son's (Jack) favorite games on it are Donkey on a Stick and Arcade Games.*

*My favorite colors are blue (deep, clear, sapphire, sky blue) and green (dark, lush, thick lawn green).*

*Your pen pal,  
Sean*

Marcy took a different approach to her first letter than did Anna. Her entire letter is centered around the topic of her computer. Interestingly, Marcy did not ask Sean any questions. And, as noted earlier, Sean took up Marcy's topic choice, and in the process told her a bit about his family. He then shared his favorite colors, describing them exactly to Marcy. He and his classmates had heard the book about the friends

sharing their favorite things, too, and he had read several of his class-

**These letters reminded me of typical classroom discourses wherein teachers are positioned as those who get to ask the questions, while children are positioned to provide answers, which will then be judged by their teachers.**

mates' letters in which children described and asked about favorites.

Marcy and Sean continued this conversation in their next set of letters.

*2/7/00*

*Dear Sean,*

*I'll bet that you are happy with your famly [family]. you do have a computer! wan [When] did you get it? Love, Marcy*

*2-10-00*

*Dear Marcy,*

*We got our computer about eight years ago. Yes, I'm very happy with my family. In fact, today is our tenth wedding anniversary and we are expecting another son! He will probably be born in July. We've named him Martin and he will have two older brothers—Alex (1 1/2 years) and Jack (9 years). Please tell me about your family. Your pen pal, Sean*

Marcy's comment, "I'll bet that you are happy with your family" seems to demonstrate her interest in developing an interpersonal relationship with Sean. Her mode of address here is strikingly different than that used by Anna in her letters to Jane. Moreover, in her letter, Marcy continued with what, to her, were the two most important threads in Sean's letter—computers and family.

As in a conversation between new friends, Sean's responses seemed to build on the interests shown by his conversational partner. He answered Marcy's question about when he got his computer, and shared personally

meaningful information about his growing family, and in the process seemed to be positioning himself and Marcy as conversational equals.

**While Jane seemed to keep Anna at arm's length, sharing only bits and pieces of herself with her pen pal, Sean and Marcy were opening up to each other, talking about personally meaningful topics.**

He did not pursue the favorite color thread, ignored by Marcy, but instead extended the conversation about families by inviting her to tell him about her own family.

Marcy took up that invitation in her response, but in a manner quite different from Anna, who responded to such queries by simply listing family members.

2-15-00

Dear Sean,

*Hi. My famle is vacy happa with me. Bet aonle my brer ges wld at becausoe it's omost like as son as he gets houmes he get's wald at. we went ice sating wsrday it uas fun.*

Love, Marcy

[Hi. My family is very happy with me. But only my brother gets yelled at because it's almost like as soon as he gets home he gets yelled at. We went ice skating yesterday it was fun.]

2-17-00

Dear Marcy,

*Our oldest son gets into his own share of trouble. However, he is a wonderful, intelligent, funny, handsome young man. He likes sports, playing outside, watching TV, playing Nintendo, and using his imagination. We are very proud of all he does and who he is—WE LOVE HIM!*

*Your pen pal, Sean*

*(P.S. I used markers today because our youngest son, Alex, loves to use markers.)*

*(P.S.S. He is only 16 months old!)*

In this letter, Marcy took Sean into her confidence, further building a

more intimate friendship with him. The mode of address Sean employed demonstrated his respect for her confidences, and shared one of

his own, telling her that his own son also gets into trouble. He seemed to say, "Like in your family, people in my family get in trouble, too, but we still appreciate each other, and love each other, too." Sean's letter reminds me of the mode of address friends might use as they try to help each other re-see a situation through an alternative perspective.

After three exchanges, Marcy and Sean's written conversations looked markedly different than Anna and Jane's. While Jane seemed to keep Anna at arm's length, sharing only bits and pieces of herself with her pen pal, Sean and Marcy were opening up to each other, talking about personally meaningful topics. The next two sets of letters further illustrate the give and take in their written conversations, and highlight the ways in which they seemed to be positioned as equal partners in the exchange.

2/28/00

Dear Sean

*Hi, I'm six I will be 7 on May 13, 2000 how old are you? I went to Grandma's hoes. Rieda soy me and Grandma ohrost the shret & asked if she kod come ovre & she kod and we played frisbe it was fun. Love, Marcy*

[Hi, I'm six. I will be 7 on May 13, 2000. How old are you? I went to Grandma's house. Rita saw me and Grandma crossed the street and asked if she could come over and she could and we played frisbee. It was fun.]

3-2-00

Dear Marcy,

*Hi! I am 32 years old. So, your Grandma lives across the street? That's great! My boys and I will probably be going over to their Grandma's house to celebrate her 65th birthday. Joyce (Mom) is working, unfortunately.*

*Over the break, my family and I went to Stonybrook State Park and threw a frisbee around and had a picnic lunch. It was fun!*

*Your pen pal, Sean*

*(P.S. What's your favorite animal? Why?)*

March 6, 2000

Dear Sean,

*Hi, When is your Birthday? Do you have any pets? I have lost 6 teeth. One time I got bonus money. What's your favreit [favorite] food? Mine's ice-crem [ice-cream]. Love, Marcy*

3-9-00

Dear Marcy,

*Hi! My birthday is September 3, 1967. Our pets are Moe (ferret), Mushroom (rabbit), Michaelangelo (turtle), Pongo (dog), and Sunshine (dog).*

*The tooth fairy visits our sons when they lose a tooth and she leaves money under their pillows. I also like ice cream. My family gets upset with me because I usually eat most of the carton of ice cream before they have had enough. My favorite food is probably crab legs. Yum! What do you like to do when the weather gets warmer? Your pen pal, Sean*

Sean and Marcy's correspondence exemplifies the correspondences that developed among the preservice teachers and children who wrote from within the discourse of shared authority. Sean and his peers chose to employ modes of address that in the beginning addressed children as potential friends, and later, as caring friends. They seldom wrote more than one or two questions per letter, and most of their

## Teacher Talk in Classrooms with Children

The following studies present research analyzing the nature of teacher talk in various classroom contexts.

Mariage, T. (1995). Why Students Learn: The Nature of Teacher Talk during Reading. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 18, 214–34.

- The study examined teachers' use of dialogue in a comprehension strategies framework designed to emphasize reciprocal dialogue between teacher and students. Low-gaining teachers maintained control of much of the discourse, while high-gaining teachers spent more time scaffolding students' responses, modeling reading strategies, encouraging risk-taking, and transferring control of the reading process to students. Low-gaining teachers spent most of their time evaluating students' responses.

Mohr, K. (1998). Teacher Talk: A Summary Analysis of Effective Teachers' Discourse during Primary Literacy Lessons. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 33(2), 16–23.

- This study explored the classroom discourse of effective primary language arts teachers to determine the communication patterns during instruction. The results present a profile of effective teacher–student

communication during literacy learning processes. The teachers' talk focused on tasks, modeled strategies, and provided a process-oriented perspective to literacy in communities where students were encouraged to participate as responsible, contributing citizens.

Hughes, M., & Westigate, D. (1998). Possible Enabling Strategies in Teacher-Led Talk with Young Pupils. *Language and Education*, 12(3), 174–191.

- An extended recording of a teacher talking with a small group of five-year-olds was analyzed in this discourse study to determine how some teachers lead children to engage in more interpretive or speculative talk, rather than just responding to teacher questions. The study looks at whether enabling styles of talking with young pupils depend on generally supportive strategies on the adult's part or on more specific teacher discourse moves. The analysis draws tentative conclusions concerning discourse moves that seem linked to developing such talk.

—Karen Smith

questions invited children to elaborate an idea about which the child had previously written. They responded to most of the children's initiations, often elaborating the topic and inviting the child to extend the conversation. In their letters, these preservice teachers shared personal information, feelings, and ideas, and wrote about a broad range of topics.

In the same way, the modes of address Marcy employed in her letters were representative of those used by other children in this category. Compared to the children described in the previous section, these children initiated topics more often and in a broader range, and they responded

more frequently to their adult pen pal's initiations with elaborations. Their letters were, in general, slightly longer than those written by children in the first section. Overall, the letters written by these adults and children were characterized by a greater level of intimacy and equality than those written by adults and children writing from within the discourse of adult authority.

### EXPLORING WHY ADULTS TAKE PARTICULAR POSITIONS

The question that interests me is why, out of all the possible ways they might have addressed the children, did certain preservice teachers

choose to address their pen pals in particular ways. Just who, as Ellsworth (1997) has taught me to ask, did my students think their first-grade pen pals were? As Jane and Sean showed us, there is more than one way to answer that question. Indeed, as demonstrated by the modes of address they employed, preservice teachers saw children in very different ways. Adults like Jane, who wrote from within the discourse of adult authority, seemed to see the children as incompetent writers to be kept at a professional arm's length. They expected their young pen pals to answer adult questions and acquiesce to adult authority. In contrast, Sean and his peers, writing

from within the discourse of shared authority, seemed to see children as interesting people, capable writers, and equal partners in their ongoing conversations. And, as Anna and Marcy so vividly demonstrated in their letters, the modes of address used by the adult pen pals seemed to make a very real difference for the children in terms of the positions available to them in their ongoing correspondences, dramatically shaping and constraining what, how, and how much the children wrote.

The children's year-end interview data bear out the patterns of positioning within power-knowledge relationships that seem so evident in their letters. One of the topics the children and I talked about during those interviews was how they decided what to write to their pen pals. A majority of the children immersed in the discourse of adult authority replied in a fashion similar to the child who said, "I look at the questions she asked and then I know what to write." When I asked one child how he would explain how to be a pen pal to next year's first graders, he replied, "I'd tell them that they write you a bunch of questions and then you answer them." Their explicitly articulated understandings

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of what it means to be a pen pal were clearly related to the ways they had been positioned by their adult pen pal's mode of address.

On the other hand, children whose pen pals addressed them from within the discourse of shared authority talked about their decisions regarding what to write in strikingly different ways. These children said that because they wanted their pen pal to like reading their letters, they usually thought about what their pen pal might find interesting. They also said that they asked questions because they could learn about their pen pal that way. One particular child's response seemed to capture what many of these children believed: "I want her to know me, so I tell her about the stuff I think about and what I do. You can make a friend that way, by having a pen pal."

As I struggled to understand why Jane and Sean and their peers employed such different modes of address in their letters, I kept returning to Davies' (2000) claim that,

*[o]nce having taken up a position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts that are made relevant within the particular discursive practices in which they are positioned. (p. 89)*

Situated, as they were, in multiple, overlapping, often contradictory discourses (Dyson, 1997), what positions might my students have taken up as their own? What might have been the metaphors and storylines through which they saw the world, and in particular their relationships with children? I cannot say for sure based on the data I have collected, but it is interesting, and I think instructive, to speculate about some of the possibilities. I wonder, for instance, how the ways that my students are positioned as writers, both in and out of academic settings, might influence the ways they, in turn, seek to position child writers.

How might the power-knowledge relationships they see enacted among teachers and children in their field-experience sites shape the positions they take up as their own? How might the ways they themselves were positioned in elementary classrooms continue to shape their own ways of seeing themselves in relation to the young children they will teach? What possible positionings might the discourses of their teacher certification program make available to them?

I am particularly intrigued by the possible ways in which the pervasive and dominant discourses of child development and *developmentally appropriate practice* (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) might shape and constrain how preservice teachers come to be positioned in relation to young children. Within this discourse, scientific child development knowledge is understood to *universally* describe children's learning and development, thereby obstructing our ability to see them as unique human beings (Cannella, 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Lubeck, 1998). Such knowledge is taken as objective truth that must inform how teachers assess young children, create appropriate learning experiences, and interact with children. Beliefs that adults should have power to direct children's learning and behavior—even *their thinking and feelings*—have become normalized, taken for granted. As a result, the possible positions that teachers and children might take up are shaped and constrained in ways that give power to adults—and leave little power for children.

I wonder, too, about the effects of the discourses of standardization and standardized testing. Within these discourses, the modes of address teachers often use position children not as real writers, but as future workers who must demon-



strate writing skills on standardized measures. Instead of responding to children as real writers—talking with them about their ideas, their purposes for a piece, finding their own voice—we focus our teaching on the skills needed to do well in the genre of test-prompt writing. Positioned as technicians controlled by high-stakes tests, teachers often respond by more tightly controlling both children’s learning and their behavior (Kohn, 2000). As a matter of fact, Kohn writes that high-stakes testing can actually cause teachers to turn against children who they see as low-performing, because such children threaten the teacher’s own position as a knowledgeable and competent professional.

## CRITICALLY EXAMINING MY PRACTICE

Clearly, no discourses are neutral. And, immersed as they are in discourses, neither are our pedagogical practices. Looking closely at the pen pal letters has reminded me of how important it is for us to critically examine all of our pedagogical practices, including the modes of address we employ. We need to do this to better understand the ways of seeing and being that have become normalized in the discourses within which our work as teachers is situated.

The pedagogical practice of pen pal exchanges between preservice teachers and young children is a case in point. Typically, such practices are held to be positive learning experiences for everyone involved (Berrill & Gall, 1999; Ceprano & Garan, 1998; Crowhurst, 1992; Jenkins & Earle, 1999; Moutray, 1998). I do not wish to dispute that such exchanges are rich in potentially meaningful learning opportunities. And yet, I have come to understand just how important it is to critique the ways

we enact such practices and what our practices might do to our students, whether they be children or adults. I have to ask how my modes of address may have shaped and constrained the possible positions my students could take up. In Sean’s and Jane’s classes, I asked students to analyze their pen pal’s writing in order to determine his or her stage

pen pals with questions began to critically examine how their ways of addressing children might influence what and how the children wrote. In the process, many transformed the modes of address they used in their letters, and made real for me the assertions of Berghoff (1997) and Davies (2000) that the more critically aware we are of the discourses

**Children and adults become certain kinds of students, certain kinds of teachers, certain kinds of people, through the discursive practices in which they are immersed.**

of invented spelling, to examine children’s growing control over conventions, and to explore the children’s topic choices. We used the pen pal letters as the basis for such discussions in class, and this analysis was an important part of the paper the students wrote at the end of the semester. I do not mean to argue that students should not consider such things. Indeed, I believe that such analyses are critical for my students’ understanding of the nature and process of language learning, and for their work as teachers. What I do think is problematic is that I privileged such analyses over inviting my students to think about how their own letters might have mediated the children’s approach to letter writing.

This past semester, as I was drafting and revising this article, I taught the literacy course once again. Early in the semester I tried to more explicitly invite preservice teachers to critically examine the nature of their interactions with their pen pals. Together we looked at how our assumptions, often at the unconscious level, shaped how we saw and interacted with young children. This time around, many of the preservice teachers who had begun the semester inundating their

in which we are immersed, the more able we are to make conscious choices about how we seek to position ourselves and others.

Dyson (1997) reminds us that “through involvement in literacy activities with others—and through their own efforts to participate in such activities—children learn who reads or writes what, to whom, when, why, how, and, of course, for what reason” (p. 17). The same is true, of course, for teachers-to-be. Children and adults become certain kinds of students, certain kinds of teachers, certain kinds of people, through the discursive practices in which they are immersed. It seems important, then, that we carefully examine how adults and children are positioned as teachers, students, writers, and as people by the overlapping, often contradictory, discourses that circulate in our classrooms and the larger world. How we attempt to shape the discursive practices in our college classrooms shapes and constrains how prospective teachers might come to construct their conceptualizations of children as people and writers, how they interpret children’s writing and learning, how they think about the instructional practices

they choose, and how they interact with children. In turn, how children are positioned by the discourses enacted by adults does much to shape and constrain what children come to learn about writing and themselves as writers and people.

If our goal is to create opportunities for children to be positioned and to position themselves as writers who have authority over their own writing—and for teachers to create such opportunities—we need to thoughtfully critique the multiple discourses in which we are all immersed. In the process, we might create possibilities to support our students and ourselves in taking a stance for the kinds of writers, teachers, and people they and we want to become.

### Author's Note

*I wish to thank research assistants Roberto Padilla and Katie Maxson, as well as Catherine Compton-Lilly, Robin Usher, Jeanne Clidas, and Leigh O'Brien for their feedback on drafts of this article. I especially thank my teacher colleagues, the children in their classrooms, and my students for their participation in this project.*

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